PROUD TO BE HUMBLE
Luke 18:9-14
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In his delightful and touching book, Brother to a Dragonfly, Will Campbell has written about the South, his family, his religious experience and his involvement in the Civil Rights Movement as a field representative of the National Council of Churches. Near the end of the book a good friend of Campbell's is killed. Jonathan Daniel, Episcopal Seminary student was arrested after registering black voters. The day he was released from jail he was shot by a special sheriff's deputy as he left a small grocery store. That night, Campbell, his brother and a friend who was a skeptic about Christianity are talking. The friend has pressed Campbell to show how his theology understood what happened. In that context Campbell experienced a kind of conversion. Listen to his words:

> "Conversion is at once a joyous and a painful experience...I, like many other Southern liberals, had tried to deny our history, to flee from it, to insulate myself from it in learning and action and sophistication...Now there was a decided difference. Because from that point on I came to understand the nature of tragedy. And one who understands the nature of tragedy can never take sides. And I had taken sides...Because we did not understand tragedy we learned the latest jokes, learned to say 'redneck' with the same venomous tones we had heard others, or ourselves, say 'nigger'. We did not understand that those we so vulgarly called 'redneck' were part of the tragedy."

Campbell discovered that in his moral outrage he had come to regard the perpetrators of racism with the same sense of superiority as they regarded black people. And while his middle class propriety prevented him from shooting them down or lynching them, he already bore in his heart the moral rationale for shutting them out of the human race. He said that the discovery taught him more about the Gospel of Jesus Christ than anything that had ever happened to him.

More than three hundred years ago the philosopher Pascal wrote: "Discourses on humility are a source of pride in the vain...Few men speak humbly of humility, chastely of chastity..." (Pensees, p.102, #377).

John Calvin believed so deeply in the unmerited grace,mercy, love and forgiveness of God that he had a hand in arranging for a man who disagreed with him to be burned at the stake.

One of the set pieces of modern theology is a little document entitled simply "Nein" - the German for "no". It is Karl Barth's response to the ideas on Natural Theology of his fellow theologian Emil Brunner. I have long forgotten the content. What I remember is the way in which Barth, theologian of grace, arrogantly dismisses Brunner as an imbecile.

And I confess - not that even my sins belong in the same category as John Calvin's and Karl Barth's - that nothing irritates me as quickly and totally as self-righteousness. In fact, I find it so offensive that I become pretty self-righteous about it.

"So it goes" Kurt Vonnegut writes whenever he uncovers that kind of absurdity in the human condition. You and I are versatile sinners. We have this relentless

need to be better than somebody. We keep being told, however, that pride is bad, humility is good. But when we try to be humble and succeed a little bit, we start to feel good about it, and before you know it we're proud of our humility.

One time Jesus told a deceptively simple little story about pride and humility. It is so simple a child can understand it. It is deceptive because it forces us to think hard and finally to examine the whole matter of God's existence and our relationship with Him.

Jesus drew a caricature of two figures everybody knew: Pharisee and Tax Collector. They had both come to the Temple to pray. The Pharisee, a good man, a religious official, a community leader - generous, patriotic, admirable in every way. The Publican or Tax Collector was a study in contrasts: he had bought his position by paying a "kick-back" to the government, who happened to be the Romans; he made a living by overcharging his fellow countrymen when they paid taxes. He was a traitor and a crook. He was also, by the way, very rich - far wealthier than the Pharisee.

Their private prayers are embarassingly honest. The Pharisee tells God the evil things he has avoided, and recites his virtues - real virtues. He thanks God for them, and throws in an unflattering, but revealing reference to that Tax Collector standing in the wings.

In the meantime the Tax Collector tells it like it is. Too embarassed even to look up he prays, "God be merciful to this rotten sinner." When they leave, says Jesus, one of them is right with God and it isn't the Pharisee.

I don't think that is quite as simple as it seems. In the first place the characterizations are absurdly exaggerated. The Pharisees weren't bad people. They probably weren't arrogant: certainly not all of them were. They were generous, good, salt of the earth, citizens. Likewise there is no way to make a Publican into a hero - even a momentary hero. My assumption is that the people who heard this parable in its original setting knew, by the very extravagance of the exaggerations, that the point was a subtle one. In the second place, experience teaches us the universality of the Pharisee's sin. We know that it is hard not to feel good about being humble. In the Pharisee's defense we know the reality of reverse snobbism and its ubiquitousness. We know about the arrogance of the Publican which uses the Pharisee's phoniness, artificiality, as a foil for its own moral failure. My experience is that there are more non-church members out there, making themselves feel good with unflattering comparisons with church members than vice versa. But here comes that self-righteousness again!

In any event, I conclude that this parable is about humility only peripherally, secondarily. Its real subject is God - His existence - our relationship with Him.

Christian thinkers have always known that spiritual pride denies something fundamental about our faith. They have also consistently suggested that its existence is universal. St. Augustine, Luther, Calvin - stand shoulder to shoulder in diagnosing the human dilemma as pride, self-centeredness. The late Reinhold Niebuhr in penetrating sequence observed that: "Moral pride makes virtue the vehicle of sin... Even the most pious practices may be instruments of human pride." (Nature and Destiny of Man, p.201).

The theologians conclude that Christian faith and spiritual pride are incompatible: that God's grace is big enough to cover any sin, except the arrogance that refuses to acknowledge any need in the first place.

The real trouble with humility, however, is not a philosophic one. It is simply that we live in a time which isn't much interested in it. Humility may be a religious virtue, but in terms of the real world it is regarded as weakness, uncertainty or stupidity. The pop psychology of the decade emphasizes over and over again the need for ego strength, self-assertiveness, self-confidence. The key to health and happiness, we are told, is to feel good about yourself - even if there is nothing about yourself you can identify as good. In business the meek don't inherit a thing: in baseball, nice guys finish last; in this world you"Win through Intimidation". The chief executive's chair is always slightly higher than all the rest: the name of the game is power, influence, prestige. Humility, in the words of one pop psychologist is "an inferiority complex turned into a virtue."

Christianity may have overdone its concern with human sinfulness at times. But that doesn't negate a very old position worth re-examining; i.e., that you can't feel good about yourself without being honest about yourself; that penitence is strength, not weakness; that health is a matter of integrity, acknowledgement, healing, not pretending there is nothing wrong with us.

A religious journalist has observed that - "Somewhere, someone started the idea rolling that confession of sin is a sign of weakness, penitence belongs only to the flabby personality who cannot stand up to be counted." (Presbyterian Outlook, Hoover Rupert, 5/20/74). That mentality, I believe, now dominates our public life. Before our very eyes several years ago it took on demonic proportions. A Vice-President, an Attorney General, a whole covey of aides and advisors, the President of the United States, in face of indisputable, clear, damning evidence, refused to acknowledge, with consistent arrogance, that wrong had been done. The ideology was frighteningly clear: honesty is not as important as the appearance of strength: meekness is weakness: humility is for losers: "being President means never having to say you're sorry". I thought at the time, and continue to think, that this nation would have been spared a lot of pain, that it might even have forgiven and extended another chance had the President simply said "Halt. Stop. We made some mistakes. We did bad things. We're sorry. We won't do it again."

Helmut Thielicke, German pastor and theologian who was hounded by the Gestapo during the war, has written the classic piece on this parable. In it I discovered this moving observation:

> "We Germans had some conception of our guilt after the collapse at the end of the last war and many of us uttered the prayer of the publican 'God be merciful to me, a sinner!' But then came one of the most dreadful moments in the spiritual history of our nation when suddenly we began to say, 'Others are just as bad as we are'," (The Waiting Father, p.134).

If we can't achieve humility by trying hard to be more humble than our neighbor, what exactly does this parable want from us? First, it is asking the strength to say, "I'm guilty", whenever that is true: "I'm sorry": the courage to admit one's fallibility and culpability and humanity. And it is asking us to stop looking down for standards by which to measure ourselves. That was the Pharisee's

mistake: not that he had exaggerated his virtue, not even that he was claiming too much merit. His error was in looking in the wrong direction for a standard by which to measure himself. He looked down and discovered as we all have on occasion that there is always someone bad enough to make us look good.

What the Publican did right - in fact, the only thing he did right - was look up to discover a standard by which to measure himself. You can be sure that he could have found someone than whom he was better, had he tried. He didn't. He looked up instead. The parable asks the same of us. The late Carlile Marney used to employ the unforgettable imagery of a house to discuss the human personality. We have a basement, he used to say. It's where the plumbing is; the garbage; it's dark and slightly dirty down there! It's where the darker, meaner side of us dwells. We also have a balcony: high, light, graceful. On the balcony are our saints: those people who inspire us to be better than we are: the models of humanity at its best. Marney's criticism of contemporary pop culture is that it asks us to spend too much time stumbling around in the basement. His advice was colorful and unforgettable: "Come on up - up into the light; up on to the balcony: look up and wave at the people standing there on occasion. Better yet, shake their hands, get acquainted with them."

The parable, finally, is profoundly theology and intensely personal. There is a form of anonymous atheism which is simple human arrogance. At its heart our deepest pride is a sense of total self-sufficiency which has no need for God.

Jesus used this deceptively simple parable to invite His listeners to think about it. He knew that the result would be humility. Sometimes science knows that better than any of us. The centennial of Albert Einstein's birth was last Wednesday. In retrospect we are discovering something fascinating about his mammoth intellect; namely, that the further he probed the secrets of the universe, the more humble he became. He wrote: "Everyone who is seriously involved in the pursuit of science becomes convinced that a spirit is manifest in the laws of the Universe - a spirit vastly superior to that of man, and one in the face of which we with our modest powers must feel humble."

The parable invites us to stand alone before the vastness of the cosmos: to contemplate the incredible miracle of life in the universe: to be open to awe - as the Psalmist put it centuries ago "When I look at the heavens - what is man that thou art mindful of him?" It is an invitation to be alone with God, stripped of all prestige and power and goods and status with which we surround ourselves... Thomas Carlile wrote a magnificent fantasy of Louis XV before the judgment seat: "Yes, poor Louis, death has found thee. No palace walls, or gorgeous tapestries could keep him out. Time is done...the pale kingdoms yawn; there thou must enter naked, all unkinged..." (The French Revolution, quoted by G.A. Buttrick, The Parables, p.88-89).

That's where our relationship with God begins - "naked, all unkinged." Humility.

And it proceeds, once begun, to help us see - perhaps for the first time - our indebtedness: to acknowledge and embrace the simple fact that our being is a gift - which we did nothing to deserve: that we were called into life by something other than ourselves: that we were loved into life and borne into life by pain and nuttured into life by patience and affection. It is to acknowledge that life is a

gift: that, without exception our dearest possessions have been given to us: the love of our families, the friendship, esteem and caring extended by others.

And then, having been made humble by the simple truth - the existence of God and the givenness of life, the teller of this parable bids us follow where He is going - the road to a cross, where the very love of God was poured out for us, all of us, each of us; a cross where the secret heart of God is laid bare and we are given a gift so priceless, so precious, there are no words to describe it, and in the presence of which we cannot even raise our eyes.

That is the humility to which God calls us: which God gives us. The honest humility which simply happens when we are alone beneath a cross; humility which there becomes our joy, our crown; humility of which - in Jesus Christ our Lord, we may be proud.

Amen.

Eternal God our Father, give us courage to be honest about ourselves. And in our humility tell us again about the glory of Your love, the victory of Your kingdom and the exaltation of Your crucified Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.